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RESEARCH-CREATION AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN

COLLABORATION

ORIANA CONFENTE

This is a set of guiding principles for more-than-human collaboration in research-creation. As slippery terms with unclear boundaries, we must form practical and theoretical protocols to navigate multispecies activities that benefit the emerging episteme. To design inclusive frameworks for artistic experimentation, we must recognize other-than-humans as contributors rather than objects of study. Key concepts are established around valuing difference, agency, and care within postnatural arrangements to decentre the “human” in “more-than-human.” These principles are applicable to students, scholars, artists, makers, practitioners, and anyone else engaging with research-based art.

Ce texte présente un ensemble de principes directeurs pour une collaboration plus-qu’humaine en recherche-création. Face à des termes aux contours flous et aux définitions mouvantes, il est essentiel d’élaborer des protocoles pratiques et théoriques afin de naviguer les activités multi-espèces de manière éthique et bénéfique pour l’épistémè émergente. Pour concevoir des cadres inclusifs favorisant l’expérimentation artistique, nous devons reconnaître les entités autres-qu’humaines comme des contributrices à part entière, plutôt que comme de simples objets d’étude. Les concepts clés de ces principes reposent sur la valorisation de la différence, l’agence et le soin au sein d’arrangements post-naturels, dans le but de décentrer l’« humain » du « plus-qu’humain ». Ces principes s’adressent aux étudiant-es, chercheur-es, artistes, artisan-es, praticien-nes et à toute personne impliquée dans une démarche artistique fondée sur la recherche.

INTRODUCTION

At the Venice Architecture Biennale 2021, a fox, rat, wasp, pigeon, cow, boar, snake, beaver, raven, mushroom, and several people were invited to gather at a four-metre long wooden table for a multispecies banquet to “find new ways of living together” in the wake of climate change (“Refuge for Resurgence”). Presented by speculative design studio Superflux, *Refuge for Resurgence* was a call for do-it-together (DIT) practices and more-than-human communities in times of political, social, and ecological uncertainty.

Unlike do-it-yourself, DIT is about working and being together in the world, while negotiating the tensions that arise from existing in/as collectives (“inclusivity/exclusivity, good/bad relations,” and so on) (Singer et al. 12-13). DIT strategies should be applied to the knowledge produced and shared through research-creation. As defined by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), research-creation is: “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation.” Also referred to as artistic research or research-based art (Bishop; Steyerl), research-creation spans many mediums and has no singular approach. It is an expansive and unfixed vocabulary at this time.

Likewise, “more-than-human,” a concept related to (and sometimes used interchangeably with) the terms nonhuman, other-than-human, multispecies, and postnature, is considered an unfixed vocabulary (Ducros). In this text, “other-than-human” denotes things that are not human (plants, animals, minerals, or others), while “more-than-human” refers to a state of interconnectedness between human and other-than-human entities. I prefer the term “other-than-human” over “non-human.” This language follows the recommendation of Gabriel Alonso, who suggested that it is violent and uninteresting to focus on the negation of “humanness” as a defining characteristic.¹ Our understanding of what is more-than-human is “constantly evolving in meaning and content to reflect a dynamic critical inter-

vention about what it means to be human as humanity must face various catastrophes” (Ducros).² What’s more-than-human is always transforming and never complete.

Behind the *Refuge for Resurgence* exhibit, Superflux designer Ed Lewis says, “We must re-frame ourselves from the apex of the ecosystem to a part, like any other” (Kazior). Donna Haraway stresses how unavoidable it is to make-with others by sympoiesis, “collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. These systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change” (*Staying with the Trouble* 61). As researchers and artists, our “sym-poietic collaborators” are our “co-laborers” (Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene” 161). In other words, to collaborate with others is to do-it-together.

Research-creation is the framework that structures my artistic practice. My work is process-based, iterative, and experimental. Rather than striving for an aesthetic standard, I seek new methods or habits, which blurs the boundaries between acts of “research” and “creation” for me. As my practice is interested in postnatural ecologies and sustainable approaches, I rely on DIT strategies and more-than-human exchanges, particularly with elements of the biosphere such as plants or minerals.³ More-than-human collaboration is essential for the research-creation that I participate in.

This is a call to shape the emerging episteme of research-creation within inclusive frameworks “all the way down” (borrowing a phrase frequently used by Haraway in her texts to describe the depth of our interconnectedness in the world)⁴ to cease thinking of other-than-humans as backdrops or accessories for human activities. Using more-than-human collaboration as a theory-method challenges human-biased perceptions of creativity (Van Patter et al. 86), shifting interest from mankind to the potential of all matter—human, vegetable, mineral, and more.

The principles that follow are works-in-progress that were first presented during the “Research-Creation Episteme: Practices, Interventions, Dissensus” symposium at Trent University in October 2023. They are a call to:

1. Recognize that more-than-human relationships are beneficial for research-creation;
2. Push the limits of research-creation beyond the university framework;
3. Accept that because humans facilitate research-creation, we are responsible for valuing contributions by both human and other-than-human actors through our practices; and,
4. Above all, practice care with other-than-human collaborators.

I am offering them, along with snippets of the theoretical and practical contexts from which they were conceived, as an independent researcher and artist who hails from Canadian academia. These principles serve as reflections and reminders for myself while navigating research-creation and more-than-human collaboration, in hopes of also being applicable to other students, scholars, artists, practitioners, makers, supervisors, and anyone else engaging in modes of research-based art. As such, this text is open to interrogation and expansion.

1. MORE-THAN-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ARE BENEFICIAL FOR RESEARCH-CREATION.

More-than-human relations are everywhere. Human beings are not even alone inside their own bodies, which are full of self-organizing minerals, microbes, and other materials (Bennett 10; Sidebottom). These “shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans” are “the very stuff of collaborative survival” (Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* 20) and they are essential for the co-production of knowledge (Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* 20-21).

Human-vegetable-mineral-other assemblages are key for artistic and scholastic investigations.

Philosopher and jazz clarinetist David Rothenberg collaborates with birds to compose music that neither could play separately (“David Rothenberg - Interspecies Musician and Philosopher”). When actor Mihai Florea feels incapable of working alongside other postgraduate researchers, he collaborates with a stick—although he frames this exchange as performing in solitude (an interpretation that I disagree with) (Florea). Within my practice, which currently explores alternative photography in the pursuit of sustainable darkroom methods, the botanical processing and printing of film is not possible without plants. These more-than-human interactions allow artist-researchers to participate in making works which are not possible otherwise. By embracing the openness of research-creation with other-than-humans, we have space for indiscipline, to play with(in) our assemblages and leave room for the “surprising change” that Haraway says is achievable through sympoiesis or DIT.

It is a simple principle but it is fundamental. Recognizing the importance of more-than-human relationships is the first step towards cultivating practices that support collaborations which advance research-creation.

2. RESEARCH-CREATION MUST PUSH ITS LIMITS OUTSIDE THE RESTRICTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY FRAMEWORK.

By SSHRC’s definition, research-creation is entangled in academia, a neoliberal and colonial institution that overlooks and undervalues humans and other-than-humans alike (Bishop; Steyerl 55; Van Patter et al. 86). Ownership over research-creation works are institutional-political questions (Chapman; Simoniti 129).

Hito Steyerl argues that to maintain innovation and resist domination, research-based art practices shouldn’t be limited to becoming yet another discipline under a university’s purview, despite the episteme’s current trajectory (61-62). Consider bio-art. Historically, bio-art experiments have been supported by academic institutions more

than contemporary art organizations (Simoniti 122). Vid Simoniti examines Maja Smrekar's *K-9_Topology* (2014-ongoing) as an example, a performance art collaboration between the artist and canines (120). On Smrekar's series, Simoniti remarks:

"Should we say that an artistic practice, such as Smrekar's, is assisted by the research she undertakes into evolutionary biology? Or should we say (more ambitiously) that, in some sense, such a practice constitutes research into evolutionary biology? [...] The issue at stake is whether we ought to see artistic research as knowledge-producing, and therefore belonging to the academy, or (merely) as art that is inspired by an academic field." (121)

Simoniti's concern about absorption extends to research-creation as a whole. Overlapping existing academic structures and the pursuit of artistic research risks forming what Simoniti calls another "methodologically homogenous discipline" (126). If conforming to an academic discipline, bio-art such as *K-9_Topology* could be subsumed by bioengineering, which might complicate standards for ethical scrutiny, utility, significance, and aesthetics (Simoniti 125-27). Appeasing bureaucratic divisions could also make multispecies explorations impossible. David Rothenberg remarks that he feels fortunate to be conducting his collaborations with songbirds at his current institution, because his investigations fall between arts and science faculties, and "only at [the New Jersey Institute of Technology] could a philosophy professor decide he wants to start making music with birds and not get thrown out onto the streets" ("David Rothenberg - Interspecies Musician and Philosopher" 0:03:09). Moreover, becoming established as a normative academic discipline means complicity in modes of cognitive and cultural capitalism (Steyerl 61), although this is not to say that research-creation is free of such issues otherwise.

Art historian Claire Bishop criticizes research-based art for "open[ing] avenues overlooked by hegemonic historical narratives but tend[ing] to shore up a canon of white male protagonists, effectively consolidating received history rather than contesting it" (Bishop). Turning to Sadiya Hartman's method of "critical fabulation,"⁵

Bishop comments: “For fabulation to have critical currency, it matters which histories are being retrieved and why.” Within critical making and design, it also “matters what matter we use to think other matters with” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 12). Fabulating, or storying-with, is a literary and scientific method for understanding and building worlds, creating and transforming knowledge or truth (Van Patter et al. 87-88). If the only matter that matters is hegemonic and homogenous, it restricts the stories that can be told, the knowledge those stories can generate, and the truths that can be evaluated or assessed. Moving away from “education-as-usual” and towards multispecies belonging makes space for diverse fabulating:

“Taking a “posthuman turn” in education therefore involves a shift from learning-as-cognition to a focus on connections between humans and non-human others; a move from the primacy of the written and spoken word to the re-emergence of the embodied self; and a recognition that other-than-human agents are always present in processes of learning. [...] Posthumanism can offer a much-needed affective turn towards the kind of social justice that accounts for difference; enacted through a process of de-familiarization from the dominant vision of education.” (Sidebottom)

More-than-human collaboration can articulate and appreciate other-than-human storying, knowledge, and truth in otherwise restricted practices (Van Patter et al. 89). Therefore, human and other-than-human collaboration in research-creation resists academic conformity and domination, and should continue defying rigid categorization within the university. After all, “artists can become bioengineers, but then we simply have more bioengineering” (Simoniti 129).

3. HUMANS FACILITATE RESEARCH-CREATION, AND THIS RESPONSIBILITY CALLS FOR PRACTICES THAT VALUE CONTRIBUTIONS BY BOTH HUMAN AND OTHER-THAN-HUMAN ACTORS.

For better or for worse, the human artist-researcher controls how to make meaning out of their more-than-human exchanges. Almost anything can be a potential collaborator, but we determine what we want to engage with by deciding the settings for research-creation and interpreting the outcome for other humans.⁶ Research-creation is an act of translation: “That does not mean that it translates correctly – but it nevertheless translates” (Steyerl 61). We have to be responsible translators.

To be a responsible translator means advocating for the agency of other-than-human contributors. How to do so depends on the specifics of the more-than-human exchange, but ultimately, the artist-researcher should resist the “homogenization and passivization of external nonhuman ‘nature’ resulting from anthropocentrism” (Van Patter et al. 85). Denying the agency of “objects” leads to their domination and appropriation (Haraway, “Situated Knowledges” 592-93). Maintaining inequalities through intersections of “power/knowledge/art—which reduced whole populations to objects of knowledge, domination, and representation” needs to be “countered not only by social struggle and revolt, but also by epistemological and aesthetic innovation” (Steyerl 59). The “epistemological and aesthetic innovation” needed here is recognizing other-than-humans as collaborators rather than research participants or objects of study. Doing so allows artist-researchers to “generate knowledge for and with others, rather than about them,” which should be one of the main objectives of more-than-human collaboration (Van Patter et al. 86). Human contributors must attempt to decentre themselves as the primary knowledge producer or storyteller, sharing that status with their other-than-human contributors.

Tuula Närhinen decentres herself in her image-making project, *Touch of Rain* (2011). Närhinen provides instruments for the rain to create its own impressions on various photosensitive materials,

which she describes as “both innovative and essentially worldmaking” (Närhinen 629). In the artist’s words, “Nature demonstrates its creative capacity by producing ‘portraits’ of itself,” drawing from the “shifts and translations that showcase the natural event—(re)produced by devices, images, and experimental methods” (Närhinen 629-30). Phytography is a cameraless, low-toxicity form of alternative photography that I employ in my practice. It involves exposing the internal chemistry of plants on photosensitive surfaces to create images called phytograms. Filmmaker Karel Doing claims phytography is important for biosemiotics as “the phytogram translates a plant’s experience of the world into an image that is legible for humans: plant sensation captured on film” (32). When I create phytograms, I don’t know how my images will look—I am responsible for selecting plants and scattering them on filmstrips, but the composition and intensity of the exposure is up to the plants and the sun respectively. I list the foraged plants that I work with as co-artists to highlight their presence in not only the artwork but also the process of image-making (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). In all cases, the human contributor facilitates an interaction while the other-than-human contributors (water, plants, the sun) take on a prominent position of authorship.

Recognizing the capacity of other-than-human actors is a necessary step, but not a novel one. Western worldviews tend to categorize other-than-humans as an “insignificant Other, a homogenized, voiceless blank state of existence,” a binary that only reinforces the human “domination of Earth” (Hall 1). However, “many cultures, including Indigenous Peoples worldwide” do not share this anthropocentric opinion—and now Western science is beginning to reflect “these ancient, long-standing Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies” after colonialism “all but destroyed a way of life and a perspective that sees the natural world as vibrant, alive, and filled with non-human lifeforms” (Tingley 5).⁷ Regarding both humans and other-than-humans as equally important in research-creation can be an anti-colonial attitude and a step towards adopting methodologies that disrupt homogenization, as long as those other-than-humans are not fetishized in the process.⁸

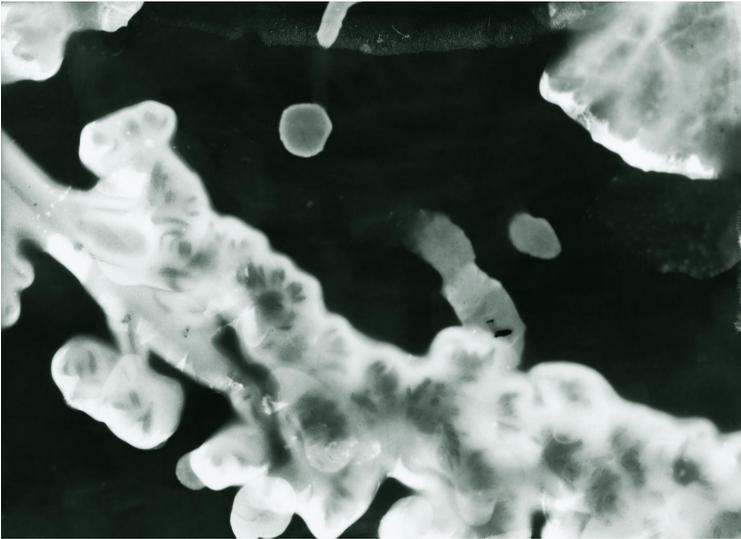


Figure 1: Oriana Confente and wild mignonette, Exercises in seeing as a leaf #2 (details), 2023, silver gelatin print.

4. HUMANS MUST PRACTICE CARE WITH OTHER-THAN-HUMAN COLLABORATORS.

This principle cannot be understated: humans and other-than-humans deserve care-full collaboration.

The Bureau of Care⁹ foregrounds a concept of care as “collective and structural practice not only for others but *with* others” (Fokianaki). This perspective is a radical departure from the care-less and isolating networks that many humans and other-than-humans exist within (The Care Collective et al. 94; Fokianaki). For arts-based practitioners and beyond, care-full change encourages knowledge sharing while re-examining labour distribution and compensation to dismantle institutional inequalities (Fokianaki).

Within more-than-human research-creation, “The presence of the non-human in art is central and ubiquitous, and the artist is ethically implicated in its management and engagement” (Beitiks 151). Care

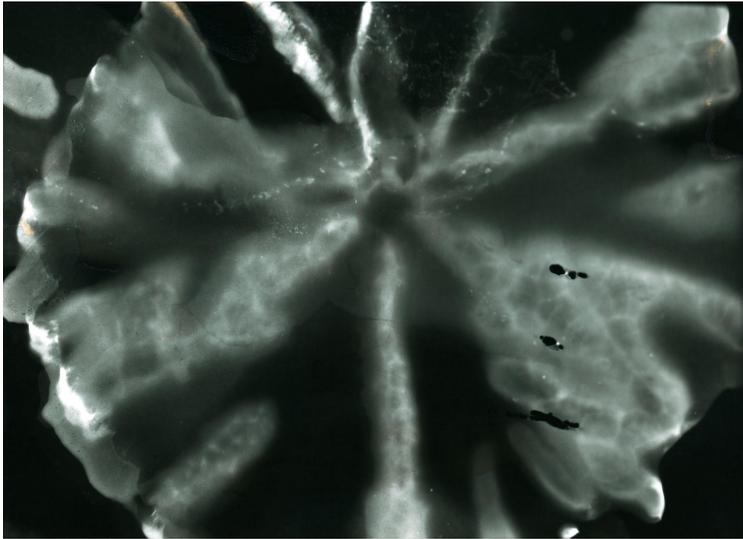


Figure 2: Oriana Confente and common mallow, Exercises in seeing as a leaf #2 (details), 2023, silver gelatin print.

is an ethical issue (Fokianaki). In my experience, there are often formal ethical guidelines for facilitating more-than-human exchanges in research with non-human animals but not other types of other-than-humans. We might have a standard duty of care mandated to exercise experiments with birds or canines, but what about sticks or rain? As the human who is facilitating a more-than-human act of research-creation (principle #3), who understands that this collaboration is beneficial for their work (principle #1), we must go beyond the minimum institutional expectations of care (principle #2).

As responsible research-art facilitators, we know that care-full collaboration upholds the value and agential power of all parties in research-creation through meaningful acknowledgment of contributions by every human and other-than-human involved.^{10,11} In that spirit, sharing the symbolic goods of authorship is one step closer to an inclusive, care-full research-creation practice.¹² But caring is com-

plicated. It shouldn't be confused with romanticizing more-than-human relationships, or limited to noticing that the other is there.

Agnieszka Kurant outsourced labour to termite colonies to produce *A.A.I.* (2014), an acronym for the phrase “artificial artificial intelligence” which was coined by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos (Kurant and Termite colonies). The termites were presented with coloured sands, gold, and crystals to build glittering, fluorescent mounds over a period of several months under the supervision of Kurant and entomologists at the University of Florida (Braithwaite; Kurant). Kurant, concerned with collective intelligence and the diffusion of authorship, credits herself and the termite colonies as creators of the series (Kurant; Kurant and Termite colonies). But is this care-full more-than-human collaboration? It's unclear what happened to the colonies after they were evicted and their mounds were lacquered in preparation for exhibition (Braithwaite; Kurant; Kurant and Termite colonies). It's also unclear if her other-than-human contributors were somehow compensated for participating in what the artist describes as “a sort of harmless, organic sweatshop” (Kurant; Braithwaite).¹³ Kurant expresses interest in bringing attention to creative hierarchies (Kurant), but does not challenge them. Kurant's research-creation collaboration raises questions about new ways to recognize other-than-human authors and how to share symbolic and material goods that meaningfully align with other-than-human values. What matters to a termite? Termites don't care if they're listed as co-authors of an artwork. They might care if they lose their home, though.

My alternative photographic series, *Exercises in seeing as a leaf* (2023-), is an exploration of more-than-human image-making. I can never truly know what matters to the leaves, flowers, twigs, or stems that I work with. I can only assume what care-full behaviour must be as an inhabitant of the same landscapes. Caring for wild plants involves mindful foraging practices—collecting only as much as I need.¹⁴ It involves using a biodegradable film developer solution so that plants can be composted at the end of our process, returning them to the earth. It involves learning about each plant, even before it is foraged, so that I can not only refer to them by name when my

work is eventually shared with the public, but also become aware of their history, characteristics, and home. I might not fully understand their perspectives, but I do my best to practice reciprocity and engage with their specific environment (especially as those environments are impacted by human activities which have triggered climate change and biodiversity loss).

I listen to Moe Beitiks's advice on performing with other-than-humans ethically and care-fully as an artist-researcher:

"We can consider the potential influence of the work on perspectives toward non-humans. We can care for the material beyond its responsibility to the work. [...] We can facilitate the human-non-human relationship. Be with things. Care for things. Listen to things. Try not to be an asshole to things. Give space to things on what could be their own terms." (156)

There is no universal understanding of the world. This is as true amongst human beings as it is true beyond our species. Although we can decentre ourselves as much as possible, when we realize that we cannot fully comprehend our other-than-human collaborators, we will likely try to approximate understanding through anthropomorphism. And that's okay—there is evidence that anthropomorphism might be a useful tool for empathizing with other-than-human perspectives (Bennett 10, Beitiks 155). If we relinquish control and embrace the role of co-creation, we can facilitate a collective, relational experience that values the research-creation process as much as the resulting artworks. More-than-human-making accounts for difference: "We are in this together; but we are not one and the same" (Braidotti 52). Try to get to know your collaborators, give them space to act on their own terms (even if it doesn't seem logical), and acknowledge their contributions.

Care is the difference between collaborating with other-than-humans and using them as pawns in our pursuit of knowledge production. Care-full more-than-human research-creation is a horizontal exchange. As concepts shift and parameters are redefined, it is clear that it is no longer acceptable to reproduce the myth of the in-

dividual artist-researcher acting alone. More-than-human collaboration is an important axis for research-creation and we must develop and adhere to standards to uphold the integrity of all actors involved in the process.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Confente, Oriana and wild mignonette, *Exercises in seeing as a leaf #2 (details)*, 2023, silver gelatin print.

Figure 2: Confente, Oriana and common mallow, *Exercises in seeing as a leaf #2 (details)*, 2023, silver gelatin print.

NOTES

1. Gabriel Alonso is the founder of the Institute of Postnatural Studies in Madrid, Spain. Our discussion took place when he taught the "New Ecologies: Decentralizing the Human Through Contemporary Practices" course in the spring of 2024. "Non-human" is a widespread term in ecological conversations and it will still appear in quoted literature.↔

2. Sometimes attributed to David Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (1996), "more-than-human" also draws from the works of environmental scholars such as Donna Haraway to acknowledge the agency of other-than-human actors and interspecies entanglements between people and the rest of the world (Kazior). To be more-than-human recognizes that we live in assemblages, "a term Jane Bennett borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to illustrate that bodies can be affected by encounters with other bodies as sites to manifest the non-hierarchical power of related matter" (Confente et al.); "living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (Bennett 21-24).↵
3. I have worked with both organic matter, namely foraged plants, and inorganic matter, such as electronic waste (e-waste), although I consider obsolete digital technologies to be an extension of the biosphere. A computer is made of rocks, after all (Evans), and a cellphone is "a mineral sandwich in your pocket" (Wark 4).↵
4. Several instances of Haraway using the phrase "all the way down" include: "I tell stories about stories, all the way down" (The Companion Species Manifesto, 21); "Poiesis is symchthonic, sympoietic, always partnered all the way down..." (Staying with the Trouble, 33); "...there are turtles upon turtles of naturecultures all the way down" (The Haraway Reader, 2).↵
5. Saidiya Hartman introduces critical fabulation in her essay, "Venus in Two Acts" (2008).↵
6. In Bruno Latour's examination of an empirical study on soil and vegetation, "Latour demonstrates how the 'facts' extracted from nature are in fact 'fabricated' (sic) by the researchers. Latour argues that we have no direct access to knowledge. It is only through a chain of representations and the parsing of that chain in both directions that natural phenomena are identified and understood" (Närhinen 629).↵
7. For examples, see the *more-than-human* group show presented during the CONTACT Photography Festival at OCAD University, Toronto, Canada in 2023. The show exhibited media artworks engaging with the intersection of art, science, technology, and Indigenous worldviews to embody more-than-human ecologies. See also, *Pollution is Colonialism* by Max Liboiron (2021), which explores our complicated relationship with plastic. Liboiron's research practices incorporate In-

digenous concepts of land, ethics, and relations, showing us how scientific methods can resist or reinforce colonialism.↵

8. Romanticizing more-than-human relationships without caring for other-than-humans—through tokenization and lack of meaningful action—is actually an extractivist, colonial attitude. See Max Liboiron’s critique on fetishizing kinship in *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021).↵
9. According to the Bureau of Care, an interdisciplinary research project initiated by State of Concept Athens, care is one of the most important foundations for Martin Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world—although his theory is too self-oriented, which is corrected by feminist scholars who position care as community-based instead (Fokianaki; The Care Collective et al. 21).↵
10. The Climate Justice Code, a tool for artists and art organizations across the Global North, calls “not imagining or assuming one kind of being or one mode of existing at the center of our practices” a form of non-extractive care (MacBride 18).↵
11. This aligns with what Anna Tsing calls the “art of inclusion” or “noticing” other-than-human collaborators, which she applies to loving fungi—a fulfilling and inspiring action for her in times of extinction (“Arts of Inclusion” 192-94). Tsing notes that “human exceptionalism blinds us” to recognizing the beauty of interdependence (“Unruly Edges” 142-44). Ecosophers urge us to demonstrate care by respecting the life and well-being of all humans and other-than-humans alike, through attentiveness and empathizing with others (Abram 50). Slowing down and paying closer attention to things we might have otherwise ignored is an empathetic position.↵
12. Citation can be a feminist act that puts us in the context of other thinkers, regardless of the legitimacy they have been allocated by hegemonic institutions—that’s how to build an anti-canon (Seu).↵
13. Kurant paid thousands of human workers for their contributions to *Assembly Line* (2017) (Kurant).↵
14. I learned responsible foraging techniques from a variety of formal and informal resources. See “An Introduction to Responsible Foraging” by Kate Hoff on the *North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems* blog for an adept summary of what to keep in mind when foraging.↵